

THE CONVENTUAL LIFE

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Compiled from the writings of

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ROUND the Virgin Mother of Christ we find a group of devoted women, who followed our Lord and His Apostles throughout their ministry. They stood steadfast to Him at His crucifixion, and became conspicuous after His Resurrection; and they received the Holy Spirit with the disciples on the day of Pentecost. In order to explain the origin of nuns or consecrated virgins, we must go back to this period of the Gospel.

Our Divine Lord extolled the life of virginity as something that was nearer than the married life to the kingdom of heaven—that is to say, as something holier and more perfectly resembling the purity of God. At the conclusion of a conversation with the Pharisees touching certain difficulties attached to marriage, our Lord said that in heaven there will be neither taking or giving in marriage; this was a reply to the Pharisees' objections, but the other side of His words struck His disciples, and they failed not to see that the virginal was pointed out as the celestial life, and so, with both sides of the remark in view, they put the question: "If the case of a man with his wife be so, it is not expedient to marry?" To this our Lord gave the final response: "All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given. There are those who have made themselves unmarriageable for the kingdom of heaven; let him that can take it, take it." I need hardly say that this is no condemnation of marriage, but it is certainly an elevation of the virginal above the married state; that is, when God gives

the gift, when that gift is freely taken, and when the kingdom of heaven is the motive. It is no command; it is an advice to those who wish to do more for God's sake than He has commanded us to do; all take not this word, let him take it who can take it, says the God of truth.

This distinction between the commandments and the counsels of Christ; between what He gives us to observe as a law, binding all souls and binding all alike; and what, on the other hand, He only advises, and advises to those especially who seek the more perfect way, is the groundwork of the whole distinction between the common Christian life and the life of perfection. It is the distinction, in its principles, between the man who divides his life betwixt God and the world, and the man who gives his whole life to God. It is also the foundation of the distinction between the married woman and the nun; an individual married woman may be holier than some individual nun, but the state of the nun is holier than the state of the wife; and we shall presently see that St. Paul has put it in that light. Nowhere is this distinction brought out more clearly than in our Lord's conversation with that young man who had many possessions. The young man comes to Jesus and asks: "Master, what good shall I do that I may enter into life everlasting?" Jesus answers: "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." The youth replies: "All these I have kept from my youth: what else is wanting to me?" Jesus looked on him, loved him, and said: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow Me" (Matt. xix.).

This youth had always kept the commandments, he had done all that the Divine Master requires for gaining everlasting life, and so Jesus looked on him with love;

but when he asks what is still wanting to make him perfect, then he is told to give all he has in the world to the poor, to throw in his lot with Christ, and to live in all respects as our Lord Himself lived—to follow Him. In a word, he was to live like the monk and the nun, in poverty, chastity, and obedience; and if, like that young man, who went away sad, having many possessions, you think this advice hard and difficult, our Lord does not deny it; He says to His disciples: “With men this is impossible: but with God all things are possible.” Then Peter said to him: “Behold, we have left all things, and have followed Thee: what therefore shall we have?” and Jesus said unto them: “Amen, I say to you, every one that hath left house, or wife, or lands for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall possess life everlasting.” Here, then, is the apostolic life, the life of Christ Himself, the perfect life, the life also of the monk and of the nun; and what greater or more magnificent confirmation of it could we wish to have than that vision which the virginal St. John saw in the Apocalypse, of those one hundred and forty-four thousand virgins, who are brought from amongst men, and whose privilege it is to “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,” and to sing a canticle which none but they can repeat.

In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul treats this subject professedly. He shows that the virginal life is of counsel, not of command, and that it is the fruit of a special gift. Contrasting it with marriage, he declares it to be more perfect, not for all, but for those who have certain gifts, dispositions, and qualifications—in a word, who have a vocation to this state of life; and mark well how carefully St. Paul gives us the signs of this vocation: “He that *hath determined*, being *steadfast in his heart*, having *no necessity*, but *having power*

of his own will, and hath judged this in his heart to keep his virgin, doth well."

It is for the purpose of testing the solidity of these five qualities that so long a probation is required by the Church, before anyone is allowed to bind herself to this kind of life. As to the spiritual advantages, the sacred motives, and the peculiar holiness that attach to the Religious as contra-distinguished from the secular life, the Apostle is very clear. He says: "The unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and in spirit. But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world, how she may please her husband." He also observes that the married are "divided," that is, given in part to God, in part to the world, whilst they who have consecrated themselves wholly to God belong to Him without division. He also speaks of those tribulations of the married woman from which the unmarried is free. In the Second Epistle to the same Corinthians, the great Apostle uses a remarkable figure of speech, which would be altogether unmeaning were it not based upon a fact with which both he and they were already familiar. He compares the union of the Church of Corinth with God to the spiritual marriage between Christ and a virgin. He says: "I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God. For I have espoused you to one husband, a chaste virgin unto Christ." It is impossible for anyone, who is not wilfully blind, to close his eyes to the fact that the life of the nun rests upon the higher teaching of the Gospel, as well as upon the most sacred examples. If, however, this life began in the Apostolic times, we should naturally expect to find some indication of it in the Acts of the Apostles, and accordingly in that record we find that, when St. Paul and St. Luke came to Cæsarea, St. Luke says: "Entering into the house of Philip the

Evangelist, who was one of the seven, we abode with him. And he had four daughters, virgins, who did prophesy.”

Until the Emperor Constantine gave civil freedom and protection to Christianity, it is obvious that nuns could not have lived in safety in Religious communities. During the first three centuries they dwelt with their relatives, secluded in the female departments from general society. Writing about the end of the second century, Tertullian says of them: “They prefer holiness to husbands, they choose their espousals with God, they love to be God’s handmaids, and to be only beautiful in His eyes, conversing with Him night and day, and giving Him their prayers for dowries” (*Tertull. ad Uxorem*). And in his work on the Veiling of Virgins, he denounces those hands as guilty of sacrilege that should remove the veil in which they are consecrated to God. The great Bishop and Martyr, Cyprian, wrote a complete treatise, addressed to these sacred virgins, in which, amongst other things, he says: “Now do we turn our discourse to the virgins, over whom our care is all the greater as their glory is the more sublime. They are the flower of the Church’s field, the charm and ornament of spiritual grace, a joyous condition of life, a perfect and inviolate work of praise and honor, an image of God that corresponds with the sanctity of Christ, the more illustrious portion of Christ’s flock. In them doth rejoice, in them doth richly flourish, the glorious fruitfulness of Mother Church; and as her virgins grow more numerous, so grows the Mother’s joy.” Let me add another passage from St. Cyprian’s book, if it be only to show on what lofty ground this profession is placed by the early teaching of the Church. The holy martyr says to the consecrated virgins of his Church: “No husband is over you, but your Lord and Head is Christ; your lot and condition is the same as His.....What we are all to

become, that you have begun to be. The glory of the resurrection you possess already: you are passing through life without life's contagion. In persevering in chastity and virginity, you are equal to the angels of God, only let that profession remain and abide perfect and inviolate.....The first commandment was to increase and multiply; the second enjoined continency. Now that the earth abounds and the world is full, they who are able accept continency, living the unmarried life, and are separated unto the kingdom. The Lord does not enforce this, but He exhorts it, not imposing a yoke of necessity in that the choice remains free. Still, when He tells us that within His Father's house are many mansions, He guides us to seek a home in the best of them. The sanctity and truth of the second birth are found more fully in you, who have ceased from the desires of the flesh and the body.....'As we have borne the image of him that is earthly,' says the Apostle, 'let us also bear the image of the Heavenly One.' This image virginity bears, perfectness bears it, holiness and truth bear it, rules of discipline bear it which keep God in thought, which maintain righteousness and religiousness, are stable in faith, lowly in fear, strong to all endurance, meek to suffer injury, swift in exercising pity, uniting heart and mind in brotherly love. All these things it is your duty, O virgins, to regard, to love, to fulfill, who, giving your time to God and Christ, are already advancing forward unto the Lord, to Whom you have dedicated yourselves, in the higher and better way." Such was the language addressed by bishops to nuns in the middle of the third century after Christ.

No sooner had the imperial power become the protector of Christianity, and the nuns felt that they could leave their paternal home with safety, than they began to gather into communities, and to live in monasteries or

convents, under the authority of one of their number called Abbess, or Mother; and their rules of life became a matter of the most careful legislation. It was in the beginning of the fourth century, in Egypt, under the great St. Antony, that the Ascetics first gathered into monasteries of women as well as of men, and the first convent of nuns was ruled by St. Antony's sister. His famous disciple St. Pachomius, the first who wrote a Rule that remains to this day, established a convent also under his sister's directions. It was through the influence of the great St. Athanasius, during his visits to Rome, that the conventual system first arose in the capital of Christendom, and St. Jerome gave it a more complete development. I have noticed that the two first founders of conventual life placed their female monasteries under the care of their sisters, but it is remarkable that all the great founders of religious rules down to the sixth century did the same. St. Basil, the great founder of Eastern monasticism, whose Rule alone prevails even to this day in the Greek Church, founded his nuns under his sister St. Marina; St. Ambrose founded his at Milan under his sister St. Marcellina; St. Augustine, whose famous Rule was written expressly for his nuns, founded them under the direction of his sister; and St. Benedict, the Patriarch of Western monachism, placed his nuns under his sister St. Scholastica. If St. Gregory the Great had not the aid of a sister, he had the experience of three aunts, who were nuns, to aid him in regulating his convents. It is obvious that this coöperation of brother and sister in the founding of the chief conventual Rules and Institutions was a providential arrangement of great importance; for their great intimacy of soul enabled them to unite the founder's wisdom with the foundress' experience of her sex and its requirements in the most effectual way for the final benefit of the Order.

In the family, authority, obedience, and liberty are to be found in their happiest combination. Yet that charm of freedom which so happily pervades a well-ordered family must be confessed to depend for its preservation upon the authority which rules, and the obedience which cheerfully responds to rule. Then there is the element which more than others nourishes unity and freedom, and this is to be found in the community life, resting as it does upon a property which, though administered by the head, is for the common benefit of all. To this must we add community of thought, feeling, and aim. And if to the natural and acquired accomplishments of that family be added the Christian graces and virtues, if to the family affection be added Christian love, then have we the happiest conditions of human freedom, and the most delightful society of which the world has any experience. The ties of mind enhance the ties of blood, and the ties of blood give vigor to the ties of affection. And each family has its marked individuality, an individuality of character that flows from its moral qualities, and in which it differs from others families, as face differs from face, mind from mind, and heart from heart. One thing more, however, is needed, which we cannot overlook with safety. That spirit, essence, air, tone, aroma, call it what you will, for it is the undefinable charm that breathes through the interior family circle, depends entirely for its growth and conservation upon the sacred privacy of home. Nothing foreign or uncongenial to it can enter within the domestic circle; all that is relegated to one or two reception-rooms or parlors. The seclusion of the family precincts, the right of a domestic retreat where no one has power to intrude, the sacred privacies of home, the inviolable security of the threshold, amidst the crowded dwellings of our towns even as in the tents of the desert, these are amongst the rights of humanity

on which are based both the freedom of the family and the securities of public liberty.

In drawing this description of the family, I feel that I have given you the accurate delineation of a convent, and that there is not a single point in which the resemblance fails. So true is this, that the Church calls her religious communities religious families.

It may be said, after admitting the general resemblance between the convent and the family, that in two points at least the resemblance fails, and that these make all the difference, and these are the strong ties of blood and the influence arising from the gradual growth of a family beneath the parental care. Yet even here, I do not hesitate in saying that the religious family presents strong analogies with these elements of domestic union. To understand this, however, requires you to realize the devout Catholic's depth of feeling respecting the Real Presence of Christ on the Altar, as being the very heart and centre of conventual life; and the almost daily reception of Christ's Body and Blood by the members of that family, as being the very closest of their ties of union with each other, as well as with God. You must understand the force derived from the veritable Blood of Christ flowing into breasts united daily for its reception, and the veritable unity as of a divine consanguinity resulting therefrom, to comprehend the force of the Catholic Mystery upon pure and innocent hearts. As to the second point, the influence derived from growth beneath parental care, this also has its striking analogy in the conventual life. But of this more fully when we come to speak of the novitiate; suffice it here to observe that a community, like a family, is gradually recruited from youthful members, trained to their new life under a care that is singularly maternal, and this gives growth to the closest filial affection.

The first of all religious communities was that of our Lord Himself and His twelve Apostles. At His invitation they left all things to follow Him, they obeyed His voice, and they had all things in common. The second community sprang out of the first: it was the Christian Church of Jerusalem. After the Ascension, the Apostles are described as in the upper room where they abode, "all these were persevering in one mind in prayer with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with His brethren." Even after the Pentecost this community life continues, and is the normal state of the Church in Jerusalem. First, all the members of this Christian society are "baptized into one spirit." Secondly, by a new kind of consanguinity, they are able to say: "We being many, are one bread, one body, all who partake of one bread." For "the cup of blessing, which we bless, is it not the communion of the Blood of Christ? And the bread which we break, is it not the communion of the Body of Christ?" (1 Cor. x. 16, 17.) The third principle of their unity is their subjection to the Apostles. The fourth is the renunciation of their private property for the general support of the community. Let us hear St. Luke's description of this religious family, now that it has reached the number of three thousand souls: "And they were persevering in the doctrine of the Apostles, and in the communion of the breaking of bread, and in prayer. And all they that believed were together, and they had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods, and distributed them to all according as every one had need. And daily persevering with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread in the houses, they took their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people" (Acts ii. 42-46). After this community has expanded into five thousand souls, St. Luke says: "This multitude of be-

lievers had one heart and one soul; neither did any one say that aught of the things he possessed was his own, but all things were common to them. And great grace was in them all. For neither was any one among them needy; for as many as were owners of land or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things they sold and laid them down at the feet of the Apostles; and distribution was made to every one according as he had need" (Acts iv. 33-35).

Translate these inspired descriptions from a mixed community of the two sexes to a community of women under one roof, and, word for word, you have the accurate delineation of conventual life; so accurate, indeed, that most of St. Luke's words are repeated in the monastic Rules.

The spirit of conventual life is a spirit of freedom. No one can set up a convent at will, or as a matter of speculation, or an act of caprice. It must be the work of ecclesiastical authority. The convent must belong to some approved Order, whose principles and rules have had the test of experience. For whenever a new Order arises, the Church is slow and cautious in giving it approval. It experimentalizes; has no other authority at first but that of the local bishop; feels its way, corrects its first essays by further experience, and meanwhile it is not considered as an Order but as a mere essay. Its vows are not Religious, or public, but only private vows, like those of any private person. The attempt fails; or perhaps the new Institute succeeds and proves its value; shows it can stand, and do its work, and secure the happiness of its members. Then, and not till then, the highest authority in the Church takes it in hand for examination. Before its approval can be accorded, the constitution and rules are put into the hands of the ablest experts, are passed from them to a congregation of cardinals, the

wisest and most learned in such matters, and after being corrected by searching tests, it receives the final sanction and becomes part of the Church's religious law.

There are not above half a dozen Rules distinct from each other in their fundamental conditions throughout the whole Western Church. All the rest are but modifications based upon the principles of one or more of these. The East has one Rule only for both sexes, that of St. Basil. The various Orders of the Church are rather like the different arms of one service, each equipped and trained for its special work, whilst all are under one general command. The spiritual basis of each Rule is drawn from the Sacred Scriptures, and to this is added a system of internal government, and a body of regulations directing the life and occupations of the members. The interpretation of this Rule lives in the traditions and observances of the convent, and in the practical good sense of the community. Should a difficulty arise on any point, other houses of the same Order are consulted, and especially the more ancient and authoritative of them. And there is always a final appeal to the higher authorities, when the common law of the Church is brought to throw light upon the local law.

Every convent must have its Rule, the Rule of the Order to which it belongs, and that Rule must be fixed in writing. It is printed, and each nun has a copy of it. This Rule lays down with the utmost exactness how far the authority of the superior goes, and where it stops and can go no further. The sphere of each subordinate official is marked out with equal precision. The choral duties, community observances, the duties and employments which they undertake, the general distribution of time, everything, even to the general character of the clothing and food, is regulated and provided for in the

Rule. The Rule is, in fact, the superior of the superior, who has simply to obey its directions. She is the executive of the Rule, and her life is as much a life of obedience to its dictates as that of her subjects. "Let all obey the Rule as their mistress," is a conventual maxim as old as the days of St. Benedict. Of the sense of the Rule the good customs and living traditions of the house and of the Order are the interpreters. Should a perplexity arise, there is the ecclesiastical authority to apply to, and that authority has the common law of the Church and its wide experience ready to enlighten the difficulty and make all clear.

Now it is a fundamental principle of conventual life, which allows of no exception, that no nun is bound to an obedience beyond what is prescribed in the Rule. The very terms of her vow include this qualifying clause: "I vow obedience according to the Rule." And the Rule to whose terms she limits the obligation of her obedience is that very Rule which she has been reading, studying, hearing explained, and seeing put in practice for years before she takes her vow. Were a superior to lift her little finger beyond the Rule it would be tyranny, not authority, and means would soon be found to regulate the exercise of her authority. For nuns are great constitutionalists, they are thoroughly conversant with their rights and liberties as well as with their duties. They are in the habit of exercising their individual judgments completely as to the condition of their whole little commonwealth on the occasion of elections and of visitations, and that not as matter of choice but of duty. And they have their right of appeal not only to the Episcopal, but even to the very highest authority of the Church.

Nuns enjoy self-government, and the principles upon which their government rests, and has flourished for the last five hundred years and more, are the three points

of the charter—universal suffrage, vote by ballot,¹ and triennial elections. The first two points of universal suffrage and the ballot date from the earliest beginnings of conventual life in the fourth century; the third point, that of triennial elections, began with the popular Mendicant Orders of the beginning of the thirteenth century, and has extended to all the rest. The members prepare for their decision by days of prayer, approach to the consideration of it as to a most solemn and sacred responsibility, and each Sister gives her silent vote for that member of the community whom, in her conscience, she believes the fittest of them all to promote the general welfare.

Those who govern are the elect of these highly-trained women. I may seem to be speaking of an Utopia; but that is my very difficulty, that, compared with any other form of society, a well-ordered convent is an Utopia—it is a mode of social life more complete and excellent in its nature than the world's experience can imagine to be practicable or possible. But then, as I have said, this mode of life requires a very peculiar preparation. A woman has a great deal to do and a great deal to undo, much to learn and unlearn, before she can be transformed into a nun. This work is done in the novitiate.

The novitiate is the period of probation, and the length of time required for it is prescribed by the Rule. During this period of probation no obligation can be taken. Whoever is but a novice may leave the convent any moment, or be sent away at any moment. The novitiate is itself preceded by a preliminary probation called the postulate. Not unfrequently this first step is the last. The postulant finds the state unsuited to her, or the community

¹The rule of many of the more modern religious communities does not include this feature of a general ballot; in the matter of suffrage and duration of office also one differs from another.

find her to be unsuited to the state, and so she leaves the convent.

Piety alone will not make a nun. Nor if a person is in the habit of praying all day long, will that prove her qualification. It is proverbial amongst Catholics that it is the lively, sociable girls of a family who go to convents, and who stay there. A lonely and isolated spirit is absolutely disqualified. Whoever is close-minded, or of a stiff or formal habit, or of a self-asserting disposition, or inclined to mope, or to brood within herself, or is twisted to singularity, whoever is disfavored by one or more of these characteristics has no hope or likelihood of ever becoming a nun, even though she enter a convent; unless it be that her defect is merely on the surface, and is found to be removable through the discipline of the novitiate. Neither is the sacred interior of the convent a place for the bitterness or the sadness which spring from defeats encountered in the world. It is no home for any form of egotism, not even the egotism of sorrow. God, and God alone, must be the one great object of thought and affection within those hallowed precincts. And the true service of God is cheerful, generous, and forgetful of self,

If the postulant goes well through her six months as a petitioner, if her mistress, and the superior and the council are satisfied with her, the question is put to the votes of the community, whether they will admit her to the novitiate. If the votes of the community prove favorable, the fact is submitted to the bishop. He then, by himself or by deputy, examines into her dispositions. If the examination prove satisfactory, a day is appointed for the ceremonial, the postulant receives the habit of the Order, is invested with the white veil, and becomes a novice. The real probation now begins. It is a maxim of the novitiate, dating from the time of St. Benedict and earlier, that a novice must be tried in all the practices

of the Order with greater strictness than is required of the community. *Prædicentur ei omnia dura et aspera*, let all that is hardest and sharpest on this path to God be plainly foreshown to her—such is the monastic Rule. Whilst thus trained and tried in external works, for their internal formation, the novices pass through a complete course of ascetic and spiritual instruction, are made acquainted with the Rule and constitutions, and are informed in all the laws and customs of the Order.

But there is an art and skill of training demanded of the novice mistress which is of incalculably greater importance than any formal instructions. This demands a clear insight into the dispositions and workings of souls, great patience and self-command, a kind and sympathizing spirit, combined with firmness and decision, great tact, and judgment to use the happy moment for action when it comes, and to turn it to the best advantage. Hence the selecting of a novice mistress who happily unites the felicitous qualities of her office is sometimes more difficult than the finding of a suitable superior. The novitiate has to work a transformation of the character, and that is a work of much greater difficulty to accomplish in some characters than in others. Here the right spirit, the spirit that can be moulded, is that to which our Blessed Lord points when He says, "Unless you become as little children, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Nor, in fact, can the kingdom of God enter into you. You cannot shape and fashion where the material responds not freely to your hand, and to understand is to stand under; it implies the child's humility.

Everyone has some defect which, to others, and especially to those of a higher standing than ourselves, is visible, even palpable, while from ourselves it is altogether concealed. Could we but see this defect, and get a conscious hold of it, we should at once correct it,

and that with a sense of confusion and a feeling of shame. It may be something in one's outward manner or speech; it may go deeper into the mind or heart; it may arise from some grave deficiency in responding to God's grace; it may be a want of openness or of simplicity; it may be a deficiency of generosity or a want of sweetness. Irascibility of temper may be the cause, or impatience and shortness of self-control; or a too scrupulous and minute way of viewing things may be sapping cheerfulness and frittering away the soul's freedom. It may be a disposition inclining to excess of self-introspection or of self-consciousness. Or this defect may be found in an amount of self-conceit, or of human respect, that is destructive to all genuine simplicity and frankness. Whatever this defect failing from the standard of the religious life may be, the essential work of the novitiate is to bring it out to the surface and home to the consciousness of its possessor, so that it can be freely dealt with, and removed out of the system. First, great freedom is encouraged, that defects may come out as well as excellencies; then by being crossed and exaggerated they are brought home to the conscience; then dislike of them arises and a desire to get rid of them, and so the help of the mistress is solicited. Degrees of victory give courage; as obstacles yield to tact or to effort a new spirit is evolved; and, finally, a new habit supersedes the old, and habit makes that easy and delightful which at first was laborious and difficult.

Those who successfully complete their novitiate gain a transformation of character which to their friends often seems inexplicable. They are other, yet the same. What before was strong and beautiful is still more strong and beautiful; but there is added a lucidity of mind, a gentleness of bearing, a forgetfulness of self, and a thought for others which reveals the genuine spirit of the convent, and

exhibits the graces of religious vocation with a felicity of which only the possessor is unconscious. Of course there are diversities in convents as in the world, and some approach nearer than others to the type of conventual excellence; but no one can be professed who has not a fair share of the religious gifts and a fair promise of growth to more.

During the postulate or novitiate no one can bind herself by any obligation. If such a one be possessed of property she cannot dispose of it, or any part of it, in order that at any moment she may be as free to leave, and to leave in as good estate as when she entered. Within two months of the expiring of her probation the novice can petition to be admitted to the vows, although were those vows actually made even an hour before the canonical period of probation was completed, the profession would be invalid and of no effect. Two months, however, before that time, if superiors are satisfied, her petition is submitted to the secret votes of the community, and if these are in her favor, the bishop makes the canonical examination into the mind and disposition of the novice. He ascertains whether external influences have acted upon her, or whether she is acting of her own free and spontaneous attraction, is led by supernatural motives, and has the true spirit of her state. Unless all things concur favorably, there may be a further delay of some months, but if they concur to her advantage, at the termination of her novitiate the novice makes her public and solemn vows in face of the Church, and exchanges the white for the black veil.

But even now, although a full member of the community, the young nun has not completed her training. As a junior she enters the juniorate department of the convent for a period of three years, and only after that term does she join the general community as a nun com-

pletely formed. The actual policy of the Church in this age is to limit the vows of the juniors to the term of their three years of juniorate, and only allow the perpetual vows to be taken after those three years are concluded. This gives some five years and a half of probation and training before a sister binds herself for life.

I have exhibited the constitutional character of conventual government. I have entered into some details for the purpose of making this constitutional government more intelligible. I have likewise shown you with how much caution the Church sets its conditions and limits to a nun's obligations of obedience, and I might have added the important observation that the Rule, or some constitutional declaration upon the Rule, lays down the maxim that nothing prescribed by the Rule, unless on the ground of some other law, such as the divine law, is binding under sin. It is a fault, an imperfection, an offence against order and rules, a something to be corrected, but it is not a crime. I have also shown you something of that great care and almost incredible precaution which guards against the possibility of binding a nun to her state of life before she thoroughly knows what she is doing, and how far she is competent for the life in which she engages. And here again I might have added that it is of the very gravest concern to a community that every means should be taken to prevent the possibility of its becoming engaged for life to one who has not its spirit, and cannot concur in promoting the general sense of happiness. And hence in voting for a new member, it is a maxim, in the case of doubt, to vote against the person. Not only because there ought to be certainty in a decision of such importance, but also because doubt implies either the defect of evidence even regarding one with whom you live, or an adverse reason which you cannot analyze.

A great founder of the Religious life, St. Columbanus, has said that "he who takes away your freedom takes away your dignity." A more recent founder of a Religious Order has left it as a precept to his spiritual children that "they should do all their actions in the spirit of intelligence and freedom." Freedom is no stranger to convents. A nun is not a slave, nor is obedience an act of slavery; on the contrary, it is intelligent, dignified, and free.

Freedom is not to be found in any outward dispositions or conditions whatever; it is an inward power, a spontaneous motion, a great moral quality, a vital force originating action from within us, the source and first principle of all responsibility, acting in the light of intelligence, from a motive of good, and for a worthy end. This at all events is the ideal of perfect liberty; by it we control ourselves, and hold ourselves back from the insinuations of error and the assaults of passion; with it we ascend above ourselves into the expansive regions of truth, of order, and of goodness.

To be able to run into error, to sink into weakness, or to commit sin, are not among the indispensable conditions of freedom, or else God would not be the freest of all beings. A truthless, lawless, godless life is not freedom; it is the very reverse of freedom, for here the will blindly puts itself into bondage. How, then, shall we define freedom? Cicero tells us that liberty consists in being the servant of law. And this heathen philosopher only anticipates the doctrine of St. Paul, who expresses the same idea in these forcible words: "Know ye not that to whom ye yield yourselves as servants to obey, ye are servants of him whom ye obey, whether it be of sin unto death, or of obedience unto justice. But thanks to God that ye were servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart, unto that form of doctrine in which ye

have been instructed. Being then freed from sin, ye became servants of justice." Here the Apostle would have us to comprehend that it is through our becoming the hearty and obedient servants of justice, in other words, of truth and law, that we are set free from the slavery of sin. In like manner St. Paul tells the Corinthians that the slave is made free in Christ, and that the freeman is the servant of Christ. To be free, then, is to be the servant of truth, to be the subject of law, to obey the voice of justice. As Balmez observes, "Liberty of mind consists in being the servant of truth, and liberty of will in being the servant of virtue; if you change this, you destroy liberty. Take away law, and you admit force; take away truth, and you admit error; take away virtue, and you admit vice." Freedom, then, only makes us free when it makes us obedient to truth, to law, or to virtue. And it follows that the most perfect freedom is that which lights us on through the highest truth to obey the highest law for the noblest end. In other words, that soul is the freest which is the most perfectly obedient to the word and wisdom of God from the motive of the perfect love of God. This at once transfers the soul into a vast region of beauty, light and truth, where she ranges free and unconfined.

But the soul's freedom has another office nearer home, and that lies in resisting its adversaries, of which the chief are our inferior appetites, our blinding passions, and distracting tempers—above all, our pride, egotism, and selfishness. Control over self, with resistance to these adversaries—in other words, the exercise of self-humiliation and of self-denial are amongst the most genuine acts of freedom, and amongst the most efficacious means for reaching greater freedom of soul. Freedom as a habit is won through the way of the voluntary cross.

Our Lord has said, "If you know the truth, the truth

will make you free." He is Himself the liberating Truth. Again He says: "If the Son make you free then are you free indeed." These are no figures of speech; they express great and practical facts. When St. Paul looks down upon the appetites warring in his members against the law of his mind, he calls them the body of death, and cries out for a deliverer, and he finds a deliverer in "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." From what does that grace deliver us? From ourselves, from our own spirit as opposed to the spirit of God. But "where the spirit of God is, there is liberty." Deeper than all other obstacles to this liberating spirit works within us that pride of life, that rooted, all absorbing egotism, which nothing will loosen save our subjecting ourselves from our very centre to God, and the surrendering ourselves to a law of obedience, of which the divine will is both the informing principle and the final motive. This is what St. Paul calls the being "delivered unto the perfect law of liberty."

It follows from all we have said that liberty is inseparable from law, and freedom from truth, and that the link which unites them in the human soul is the ready obedience and voluntary submission of that soul to whatever the wisdom of God prescribes and regulates for the perfecting of our spiritual nature. And it no less follows that the most perfect obedience rendered to the highest law of Christian perfection, to that law which gives us command both of ourselves and of special favor with God, is the straight and sure way of liberty. The habit of obeying intelligently, heartily, and of good conscience, is of all ways the most efficacious for developing the energetic power of the will, in making it ever prompt and answerable to our call. And a vigorous and responsible will makes a cheerful and happy spirit. It is this habit of obedience which forms the free and ener-

getic character of the seaman; while maintained in the face of peril, it gives dignity to the soldier; men grow into heroes by sacrificing themselves in obedience to principle. Without obedience to something higher than ourselves, nothing is ennobled in this world. The artist is free of his art by subjecting himself to its laws; the man of science by humbling his intelligence to the conditions of his science; the inventor succeeds by tying himself down to the facts by which his conjectures are brought to the test. The nun has set herself to gain the art and science of spiritual perfection, of forming her soul upon the model of our Blessed Lord, and the more completely she obeys the law of His example the more free she will be in her own soul, the more free also in Him whose life and example she is following. Obedience is not forced, but given willingly; and, as it is said by an Abbot of the eighth century, "Freedom is not given up because humility freely bows its head."

But there is another condition that is a most important aid to the force of freedom, and without which the strongest will is weakened and wasted; and that is the limitation of its sphere of activity. The created will must have a line and a limit; without that it is uncertain and bewildered, or, at all events, its powers are enfeebled and divided. It is by force of the limitation and concentration of light that the telescope gains its power of searching the distant heavens. It is by limit and concentration that steam puts forth its irresistible strength. Bossuet gives us another illustration. He compares the free force of the human soul to a river. If left to wander at its own unlimited will, it will overflow a country and become a shallow, stagnant, pestilential marsh; but let it have banks for its limitation on this side and on that, and it becomes that clear, deep, energetic stream of waters flowing on with irresistible freedom

until it rejoins its parent ocean. So is it with the mind, so with the will; they are free in their labors and strong in their freedom, and they make us strong and free in proportion to the judiciousness of the limitations which we set round their exercise. And this is precisely what is done in the religious life. The Rule and the authority of superiors mark out the sphere of each one's duty and activity; and the subject fills up that sphere of duty traced by the voice of authority with her own intelligence and judgment. One nun is appointed to sing the antiphons in choir; another is set to teach a class in the pension school; a third is sent out to visit the sick poor; a fourth has the charge of patients in the hospital; a fifth is set down to the embroidery of a vestment; a sixth is appointed to superintend the domestic department; thus each one is set to a sphere, and one for which she is adapted. Authority draws out the lines of duty for obedience to accomplish, and freedom fills them up. This gives that vigor to the character of well-trained nuns which led Count de Montalembert to say that "strength, veiled by gentleness, is the breath of their life."

And here we must again turn to the character and example of our Blessed Lord, Who is the perfect model of this way of life. From His birth in the manger to His death on the Cross His life was one unbroken act of obedience, and obedience under vow. He "offered Himself once for all," and "was offered because He willed it," and the words of the vow by which He offered Himself St. Paul has put on record (Heb. x.). He says: "Coming into the world, He saith: Sacrifice and oblation Thou wouldst not have, but Thou hast fitted to Me a body. Holocausts for sin did not please Thee. Then I said: Behold I come: at the head of the book it is written of Me, to do Thy will, O God. . . . Then I said: Behold I come, to do Thy will, O God." Entering into

the world He vowed that obedience which He consummated on the Cross. From His twelfth to His thirtieth year the record of His life is summed up in these words: "And He went with them [Mary and Joseph] and came to Nazareth: and He was subject to them." After He had passed from the condition of a working man to fulfill His mission to the world, He said: "I came not to do My own will, but the will of Him that sent Me." And to show that His Father's will was the Rule which He obeyed, He also said: "I do nothing of Myself. What I see My Father doing, that do I." And so "He was made obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; wherefore God hath exalted Him, and given Him a Name which is above all names." Yet this obedience, this oblation of obedience, was the fruit of the most perfect freedom. He freely offered Himself, He held free command over the inferior passions and sorrows of His human nature. In the midst of that nature's agony He exclaimed: "Not My will but Thine be done." He was even "free amongst the dead." There is nothing left after this but to accept the truth that obedience to the holy will of God is the perfecting of humanity, even the perfecting of human freedom. The very reward of our Lord's humble, chaste, and self-denied life on earth, the exaltation of His humanity to the right hand of God, His power also over the world, is ascribed to His obedience.

From beginning to end, and from superiors to subjects, the work of conventual life is the work of obedience to the will of God. In the words of the Rule, in the customs of the community, in the ordering of the day, in the sound of the bell, in the voice of superiors, in the ordinations of Providence, bring they toil or rest, consolation or suffering, at all times, in all things, the nun sees, the nun hears, the nun loves to accept and obey the holy

will of God. Everywhere the will of God meets her, everywhere she meets the will of God, and that with this sense of Christ within her heart: "I came not to do my own will, but the will of God who sent me." It is this which makes her life unselfish, and, therefore, easy, sweet, and vigorous.

The privacy and seclusion of the domestic circle loosens the mind from its trammels of caution, and sets free the heart to flow at its sweet will. He who is free of the family has only to enter within its precincts to find himself disencumbered of fatiguing self-guardedness and human respect. God has placed no creature of a high temperament in an atmosphere much lower than its own without providing it with an ample defence. The albatross is protected by its wealth of feathers, and the ermine by its beautiful fur. The tone and constitutional temperament of those who are consecrated to God is much higher than that which is prevalent in the world, and hence the need of some providential protection for the one against the other. But why should the world be angry at the isolation of that which belongs not to it? Why should the world refuse to tolerate the little spot here and there that He who created the earth may keep, and within the limits of which all may be devoted to Him? In its proudly insisting that all should have their rights, why will the world yield no exclusive rights to God, or to God's servants? The real object contemplated in the walls that protect a convent is not to imprison the nuns, but to shut out the world. There is nothing so easy as to get into a prison, yet nothing so difficult as to get out of it again. In a convent, on the contrary, it is so very difficult to find a way inside, but so very easy for anyone who is inside to find the way out. And the reason of this is, that everything is regulated with a view to exclude the world, but not with a view to imprison the nun. In no

unkindness to the world or to its children, with many prayers for its amelioration, bidding it farewell, with gratitude for the good and pardon for the evil it may have done them, with great good humor the nuns draw a wall round the world and put it in prison, thanking God for the little plot of earth where they are left free and in peace, there to live under a holier law, there from that resting point to contemplate and move the heavens.

Convents are divisible into two classes: those of the Contemplative and those of the Active Orders. The chief object of the Contemplative Orders is prayer, whilst the object of the Active Orders is to combine prayer with works of charity and benevolence. Some are disposed to accept the Active Orders as worthy their commendation, whilst they reserve their reprobation for the Contemplative Orders. But this is narrow, illiberal, and in direct opposition to the spirit of freedom. Such persons do not give themselves the trouble to understand that all spirits and all attractions are not the same, and that every spirit must praise God after its own way. The votaries of art and of practical life would find themselves badly off without the votaries of science. One contemplates the heavens, that another may cross the seas with safety. The maxims and the rules which sustain the spirit of the Sister of Charity are drawn from the great lights of the Contemplative Orders. The hosts of Israel, headed by the valiant Josue, confronted the enemy in fight upon the plain; but it was Moses lifting his hands to heaven on the mountain top who gained the victory. If it be a great mercy to help the world in its distresses by our labors, it is as great a mercy to move the powers of heaven to succor the same world. And for that end the prayer of the just availeth much, as the Scripture tells us. Is it nothing in a world where God is neglected as in ours, that amongst the divisions of labor there should

be a class who neglect the world, in order to supply more perfectly for the world's neglect of God?

One of the most beautiful attributes of the nun is her maternal character—wherever a mother is wanted by distressed and bereaved humanity, there she steps in as a mother sent from God. Childhood, youth, maturity, and age all find a mother in their hour of need in her. She who has given up the function of natural motherhood has her hundredfold in the function of spiritual motherhood; without children of her own on earth, she claims many children of her own in the kingdom of heaven. The very presence of virgins consecrated to Christ breathes a purity, inspires a modesty, and impresses the mind of their sex with a sense of the sanctity of this virtue, which exercises a great influence upon the general purity of woman: and in contemplating their spiritual maternity, and their holy influence upon the matronage of the world, we may well see in them the singular realization of the prophecy of Isaias: “Rejoice, O thou barren who bearest not; sing forth praise, and make a joyful noise, thou that didst not travail with child: for many more are the children of the desolate than of her that hath a husband, saith the Lord.”

The occupations that fill up the day in a community of Religious women are of two kinds: first, there are the various religious exercises, consisting of the recitation of the Divine Office in choir, meditation, and spiritual reading; and there are the active duties, either of charity or of necessary household cares. The larger portion of time given in all communities to prayer falls in the early morning hours, and towards the latter part of the day, leaving a considerable portion of the day free for work. Even in enclosed Orders which do not devote themselves to teaching or the care of the poor, active occupations of one sort or another fall to the share of each

member of the community. A large convent makes a great deal of work in itself, independently of the institutions that may be attached to it. As it is the aim of Religious women to have as little intercourse with the world as possible, they endeavor to supply as many of their wants as they can by means of their own labor, and thus a great variety of employments is undertaken by them, which not only affords a useful occupation of time but is also a source of interest and recreation, and often calls forth abilities that would have lain dormant in the world.

The prevailing spirit of a community thus variously employed is undoubtedly one of cheerfulness. This spirit is cherished by many provisions of the Rule, particularly that which alternates the different exercises of prayer, work, and recreation in judicious proportions. The time-table may differ in different convents, but in all the principle is established of making work succeed to prayer, and recreation to work. The long attendance in choir which no doubt appears excessive to some critics, occupying in some communities five, in others six, and in others even eight hours a day, is felt to be a source of delight to those who find in it their spiritual refreshment, and who come to it from active labors. Manual labor often interferes to prevent the head from being weakened and exhausted with mental labor. The necessity imposed by the Religious rule of breaking off any occupation at appointed signals and exchanging it for the particular community exercise which has next to be fulfilled, proves by experience to be one of the greatest safeguards of health and cheerfulness.

It is also proper to observe that in every Religious community certain hours are set apart, generally twice in the day, for all the members to assemble for recreation in common. At these times Religious women are accus-

tomed to entertain themselves and one another, either in or out of doors, as other intelligent women may be supposed to do, that is to say, by conversation, reading aloud, or the like. In the history of St. Jane Frances de Chantal many charming notices are to be found of the recreation of the nuns of the Visitation Order, in which we see the pleasant gaiety, tempered always by a religious spirit, which prevailed among them; and in which some, who had formerly figured as great ladies in the world, employed their talents in composing spiritual songs which they and their sisters sang at such times, or in other innocent and suitable diversions.

To conclude with the well-weighted words of the Count de Montalembert: "It is the special attribute of monastic life to transfigure human nature, by giving the soul that which is almost always wanting to it in ordinary existence. It inspires the young virgin with an element of manfulness which withdraws her from the weaknesses of nature, and makes her at the necessary moment a heroine; but a soft and tender heroine, rising from the depths of humility, obedience, and love, to reach the height of the most generous flights, and to obtain everything that is most powerful and enlightening in human courage. Sometimes it adds, by a supernatural gift, the incomparable charm of childhood, with its artless and endearing candor; and there may be seen upon a living countenance that simplicity in beauty, that serenity in strength, which are the most lovely array of genius and virtue. Thus it happens by times that all that is most grand and pure in the different types of humanity—the man, the woman, and the child—is found combined in one single being, which accomplishes all that a soul can do here below to rise from its fall, and render itself worthy of the God Who has created and saved it."

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